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ABSTRACT

Techniques for managing conflict between colleges were used as a context for evaluating interinstitutional goal setting. The specific study objective was to identify techniques used to stimulate and control creative dissension that is an essential part of significant cooperative endeavors. A questionnaire was pilot tested with 40 members of a cooperative consortium and the investigation was conducted with 111 directors of academic consortia. Participants were asked to rank on a six-point scale the relative effectiveness of 55 conflict management techniques and to indicate those which were used in their consortium. Results indicated that conflict is controlled primarily through avoidance. Techniques that rely on analysis of objective data are rarely used as the basis for decisions on cooperative programs. Test items that described broadly consultative procedures for the determination of goals to be achieved through joint efforts were perceived to be highly effective conflict management techniques. It is suggested that institutions that are concerned with advancing cooperation must first look at their institutional data bases and the possibility of developing standardized systems with cooperative institutions. Areas that are critical to the success of shared ventures include cost analysis, needs assessment, program assessment, and communication. (SW)

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PLANNING FOR INTERINSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twentieth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, April 27 - May 1, 1980. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

Mary Corcoran
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ABSTRACT

The growth of interinstitutional cooperation in higher education has been impressively rapid during the past decade. Initially in response to burgeoning enrollment demands, and more recently in answer to fiscal stringencies, the cooperative movement has been regarded as the provider of greater access, increased quality, and possibly, reduced costs. These joint ventures occur in a context in which the potential for conflict among participants is always present. This study examines the means through which conflict can be used in positive ways to advance cooperation and suggests the development of standardized interinstitutional data bases as a technique for managing conflict. The development of such systems is recommended as an initial step in planning for interinstitutional cooperation.

"Strategic planning" is the latest phrase to migrate from business environs to the academic scene. In this transposed environment the term describes an approach in which various alternatives for action are analyzed by the university to determine their relative "profitability" for the institution. As strategic choices are made, it has been noted that the more technical aspects of planning and budgeting are being expanded to accommodate such factors as quality and marketability of academic programs (Jacobsen, 1980). With a projected decline in enrollment ranging from 5% to 15% over the next two decades (Carnegie Council, 1980) and an inflationary rise in the higher education price index of over 15% in the past two years (Magarell, 1980) university administrators recognize that they are dealing with a buyer's market and program quality is the product they will have to sell.

Now more than ever the prospect of maintaining or improving quality through sharing resources and expenses with other institutions becomes a strategic alternative which must be given serious consideration. Yet despite the logic and the rhetoric which support interinstitutional cooperation, a review of the innumerable joint programs which have been undertaken indicates a significant tendency toward the promotion of cooperation in matters which are of relatively little consequence to the institutions. Rarely are these undertakings conducted in areas or at organizational levels in which they would have a profound impact on the participating institutions (Patterson, 1974). The paradox between need and reality is puzzling yet it can be more clearly understood if it is examined in terms of the threat which cooperation poses to institutional autonomy, the potential for conflict which this threat carries and the ways in which this conflict is handled by the participating institutions.

THE STRUCTURE OF COOPERATION AND CONFLICT

The Impediment of Autonomy

In academic environs, the desire to share a common benefit is frequently blocked by a fear of weakening institutional autonomy. Indeed, autonomy is viewed as the principal direct impediment to effective cooperation (Patterson, 1974). This concern undoubtedly has a significant effect on the selection of areas in which cooperation is undertaken. Research studies have concluded that joint programs exist in areas which are peripheral to the "heart" of the institution (Kreplin & Bolce, 1973) (Kochan, Cummings, Huber, 1976). By focusing cooperative efforts in non-critical areas institutional autonomy is preserved, conflict is avoided and the impact of cooperation is diminished. Apparently these limitations are consistent with the intent of institutional decision makers (Grupe, 1975) but it is precisely in those areas in which autonomy would be most seriously compromised and conflict most apt to develop, that is, in matters of academic program and standards, that strategic planners will perceive the greatest opportunity for enhancing their "product." It is in these controversial areas that planners must develop strategies to manage conflict if their attempts at interinstitutional cooperation are to succeed.

The Organization of Cooperation

Cooperative programs exist in those interstices of common interest which join the participating institutions yet stand apart from the administrative authority and protection of any of them. A comparison of vital elements in the organizational structures of a bureaucratic organization and a cooperative coordinating body illustrates the contrasts

which exist (Figure 1). These experiments in sharing take place absent the support of a traditional organizational authority structure and in a confused setting of diffused autonomy, minimum standardization of operational procedures and inconsistency in values (Litwak and Hylton, 1963). It is perhaps understandable that conflict is avoided in an organizational structure which seems ill-equipped to deal with controversy, yet it is precisely through conflict that cooperative ventures can be most readily advanced. To understand this paradox it is helpful to look more closely at the kind of organizational adjustments which interinstitutional cooperation demands. Cooperation in the areas which would be of most significant benefit to the institution, for example, shared academic programs, is circumscribed by a multitude of sensitive issues each of which may require some attenuation of institutional autonomy. Agreement, and hence cooperation, can be achieved only if these issues are critically examined in an atmosphere in which a candid appraisal of potential gains and losses can be entertained. Such discussions may well produce conflict, yet, if creatively controlled, this very conflict will lead to the negotiation of the "loss" each institution is willing to endure in order to realize the ultimate "gain" which the joint venture promises. Without such discussions the negotiated compromise which holds significant benefit for the institution would never be achieved and cooperation would continue to occur at the least significant level.

Since the management of conflict must take place in an organizational mode which lacks a defined and autonomous authority structure, resolutions can be neither readily arrived at nor easily implemented. Agreement is negotiated rather than decreed. In this unstructured setting, conflict

ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	BUREAUCRATIC ORGANIZATION	THE COOPERATIVE COORDINATING UNIT
Authority	Clearly defined authority structure. Decisions are enforced.	No authority structure. Agreement is negotiated and is not enforceable.
Autonomy	Absolute control over decisions in areas vital to the well being of the institution.	Shared control over decisions. The best interests of individual institutions generally take precedence over the interests of the cooperative unit.
Standardization	Operational procedures are uniform.	Operational procedures vary among member institutions.
Values/Goals	Consistent. Values and goals reflect organizational needs.	Inconsistent. Goals are shared in some areas, competition exists in others.
Conflict	Dysfunctional. Retards achievement of goals.	Functional. Serves to clarify common goals, identify interdependencies and potential benefits.

FIGURE 1 COMPARISON OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

becomes a most effective negotiating tool, serving to identify areas of interdependence, define boundaries within which cooperation can occur and generate the search behavior which can bring success to the cooperative venture (Litwak and Hylton, 1963). The critical issue to be examined by strategic planners is not the existence of conflict but rather the techniques which can be employed to make its existence profitable.

A study of an organization established to coordinate cooperative academic activities identified five conflict management concepts which evolved as the intensity and complexity of the joint efforts expanded.

1. Division of labor - diffusion and delegation of authority.
2. System of checks and balances - power is distributed equally, rights of enquiry are legitimized.
3. Decentralization - coordinating unit dispersed to preclude its possible development as an autonomous agency.
4. Coalition - members formed interest based alliances with one another.
5. Ethos of voluntarism - membership and participation in any project is voluntary.

(Lancaster, 1969)

Lancaster's findings verified the premise that in the planning and development of interinstitutional cooperation attention had to be given to the establishment of procedures through which the potential for conflict could be channeled and effectively utilized. Still to be identified, however, were the specific organizational procedures through which these techniques were most effectively applied. Nor was it known to what extent coordinating bodies actually used conflict to further

cooperation. In an effort to gain some insight into these unanswered questions a study was undertaken to identify and assess the actual practices which coordinating bodies used to manage conflict.

CONFLICT -- MANAGED OR AVOIDED

In developing this study it was necessary to identify an issue critical to the formulation of cooperative programs to which Lancaster's model of conflict management concepts could be applied. Accepting the premise that successful cooperation is based upon two or more organizations acknowledging the existence of common goals (Price, 1972) and agreeing on the "domain" in which joint endeavors would be possible (Levine and White, 1961), it was hypothesized that the determination of shared goals was among the most conflict-laden processes encountered in the coordination of cooperative programs. The interinstitutional goal setting function then became the context in which conflict management techniques were analyzed.

The determination of shared goals and of the areas in which cooperative action is in the best interests of each of the participants is an excessively sensitive process. That which cannot be agreed upon collectively frequently can be negotiated through appeals to special interests. While this process may well unlease conflict, it is in that ensuing discussion of the relative importance of these interests that the channels for coalition and cooperation are formed (Thompson & McEwen, 1969). The specific purpose of this research study then was to identify those techniques which were used to stimulate and control that creative dissension which is an essential part of significant cooperative endeavors.

Identifying Conflict Management Techniques

A survey questionnaire was developed to gather information on conflict management techniques invoked in the process of developing goals for cooperative ventures. Lancaster's categories referred to earlier were used to provide a model upon which statements of specific procedures for conflict control within a goal setting context were formulated. This initial listing of strategies which was based on research investigation and the author's experience while working with two voluntary consortial associations was reviewed and revised by several directors of established academic consortia. The suggested revisions were incorporated into a preliminary questionnaire which was tested in a pilot study distributed to 40 members of a cooperative consortium. Participants were asked to rate the described procedural techniques in terms of appropriateness within a cooperative setting and their effectiveness as devices to promote success in these undertakings. Based on a response rate of 42.5%, 83% of the test items ranked at the top of a six-point Likert scale, receiving ratings between 1 (very appropriate) and 2 (moderately appropriate) while 16% of the items were rated between 2 and 3 (minimally appropriate). Selected for inclusion in the final questionnaire were those items with ratings ranging from 1 to 2.7. As a result of the pilot study, some of the items were rephrased for purposes of clarity and the rating scale was revised in order to articulate more clearly the range of possible responses. Following these revisions the penultimate questionnaire was reviewed by directors of academic consortia other than the subject of the pilot study and their suggestions for changes were incorporated within the final questionnaire.

Based on the assumption that the directors of formally constituted academic consortia would have had extensive experience in implementing and evaluating techniques to advance cooperation, the population selected for the actual research study was the 111 directors of academic consortia listed in the Consortium Directory (Patterson & Burns, 1977). The participants were asked to rank on a six-point scale the relative effectiveness of 55 conflict management techniques and to indicate those which were used in their consortium. Possible ratings were 1 - very effective, 2 - moderately effective, 3 - slightly effective, 4 - slightly ineffective, 5 - moderately ineffective, 6 - very ineffective. Data received from 64% of the test population were analyzed to establish the mean effectiveness rating and standard deviation for each item. The full range of mean scores for effectiveness ranged from 1.6 to 3.5 on the six-point scale, with 37% of the items receiving mean ratings in the very to moderately effective group (1.6-1.9), 41% of the items falling in the moderately effective range (2.0-2.4), and 11% attaining ratings in the slightly ineffective range. While not of significance in terms of this report, it is of interest to note that an analysis of variance based on demographic characteristics of the participating organizations indicated that consortia that are smaller in size, relatively recently formed and with members in close geographical proximity appear to be somewhat more apt to risk conflict than are their older, larger, more widespread counterparts. However, the most revealing findings of this study for our immediate purposes lie in the contrast between those conflict management strategies which were identified as most and least effective in a cooperative setting.

Limiting Conflict or Cooperation

The focus of the questionnaire was on the processes used to establish goals for academic cooperation, from the first consideration of possible shared activities through the final evaluation of the attainment of common goals. The potential for conflict within this context is obvious. The results of this study indicated quite conclusively that conflict is "controlled" primarily through avoidance. Rarely used are those techniques which rely on the analysis of objective data as the basis for decisions on cooperative programs. The issues which would pierce the wall of institutional self interest and autonomy are not engaged because the information which would define these issues at a level deeper than the purely superficial is not generated and, therefore, the discussion and conflict which could move cooperative efforts from inconsequential to significant areas rarely occurs.

Addressing this issue more specifically, the study indicated that those test items which described broadly consultative procedures for the determination of goals to be achieved through joint efforts were perceived to be highly effective conflict management techniques, receiving ratings in the 1.6-1.9 range. These strategies were used in from 75% to 84% of the consortia surveyed. However, those test items which examined with greater specificity these consultative processes through which goals were determined revealed an avoidance of the use of substantive data and a penchant for the non-controversial. For example, while the assessment of need for cooperative programs was ranked as one of the most effective techniques for determining goals and controlling conflict, the single most used criterion to assess such need was the interest of the participating institutions in offering the program. Less than 35% of the respondents

examined the comparison of cost between independent and cooperative programming as a means of determining the relative benefit of shared activity. The evaluation of existing institutional programs in terms of capacity to respond to student demand, quality and level of unnecessary duplication was ranked as an ineffective technique for assessing cooperative program need. Needs assessment as a basis for advancing cooperation appears to be used at the least sophisticated level. The conflict which might result from the gathering and review of relevant information in more controversial areas is generally avoided.

Similarly, procedures which evaluate progress toward the attainment of cooperative goals are perceived to be among the most effective techniques, with ratings clustered in the 1.6 range, yet utilization of such procedures occurs in only 54% of the consortia surveyed. Fewer than 50% of the respondents base their decisions on program continuation or modification on the results of such goal achievement evaluation. Further, the goal setting and evaluation process is perceived to be the exclusive domain of those connected with the cooperative activity. Of all the test items, the least variance in response was achieved on the ineffectiveness rating given those items which proposed inclusion of faculty and staff who were not actively participating in the programs in the evaluation of cooperative ventures.

Perhaps the most revealing response elicited by the study dealt with the establishment of program priorities. Ranked among the least effective techniques (3.0 rating) and utilized by fewer than 20% of the respondents were those items which proposed the ranking of cooperative programs in priority order and the allocation of funding based upon these priorities. The findings lend credence to Fritz Grupe's admonition:

> Little progress has been made by consortia in structuring sensible procedures by which priorities are assembled and implemented . . . Most directors continue to fly by the seat of their purse and use no other criterion than "If it works . . . do it!" to determine whether a given project should go or not.
> (Grupe, 1974)

The reluctance to establish priorities is indicative of the same malaise which limits the full development of cooperative activities in the other areas we have examined--goal setting, needs assessment, evaluation. While there is recognition of the importance of these functions to the success of the cooperative activity, they are implemented only at the most unsophisticated and cursory level, at a level where no threat to autonomy can be perceived and, therefore, no conflict can result. Far from being used as a means to define interdependencies and establish new boundaries, conflict is quite systematically avoided. Issues which are never articulated, can neither be debated nor resolved, dissension is circumvented and cooperation remains impaled at the most inconsequential level. The propensity toward avoidance rather than management of conflict is apparent, yet this tendency is a manifestation of a more basic problem which places limitations on cooperation--the absence of agreement on interinstitutional standards for the collection and interpretation of relevant information.

PROVIDING A BASE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The ability to manage conflict is inexorably linked to the predisposition of the potential antagonists and the context in which

the issue is joined. When dealing with interinstitutional cooperation, we can assume that to a variable degree the individuals involved bring to the situation a bias in favor of some sort of sharing. The required control element which is lacking is the ability to provide the data which will define the issue and establish the context for conflict management. Absent such information the tendency to examine only at the most cursory level the need, benefits, costs and results of cooperative activities will perpetuate itself. If interinstitutional cooperation is considered as one element in strategic planning, it is essential that the needs, benefits, deterrents and results be so convincingly demonstrated to participants that the conflict over moving cooperation from inconsequential to significant levels will be joined in an arena where issues are cogently articulated and alternatives clearly understood.

Interinstitutional Data Base

To achieve this goal, institutions that are concerned with advancing cooperation to a more significant level need to look first to their institutional data bases and to the possibility of developing standardized systems with those institutions who will participate with them in the joint efforts. Certain areas are particularly critical to the success of shared ventures.

1. Cost analysis - While it has not been conclusively demonstrated that cooperative activities do result in extensive savings (Patterson, 1970), the cost avoidance factor and the relative benefits of improved quality and increased access need to be computed in any cost analysis study of shared programming. Participating institutions need to develop standardized operational cost figures and formulae upon which cost avoidance can be computed.

2. Needs Assessment - Using the sophisticated marketing techniques which are being introduced into the academic environment, standardized data should be collected by the participating institutions on the unserved constituencies, unmet program needs, areas of diminishing student demand, inventories of existing programs and areas of unnecessary duplication of effort. This data base becomes the context within which the issue of program priorities can be resolved. It becomes as well a valuable asset in applying for external funding of cooperative programs for which there is a demonstrable need.

3. Program Assessment - Having justified the development of cooperative programs through cost analysis and needs assessment studies, cooperating institutions need to develop standardized evaluation techniques through which the success or failure of these programs can be measured. The conflicts over the development or discontinuance of cooperative programs can be productive only if such assessment information is available in both quantitative and qualitative formats.

4. Communication - The study revealed a reluctance to involve peripheral constituencies in the development of goals and the evaluation of cooperative programs. The generation of the information on cost, needs and quality of these programs should be communicated to faculty members and students who are not intimately involved with these shared activities as one way of extending knowledge of and support for interinstitutional cooperation.

Conflict management is an uncertain art at best and one which does not lend itself to facile prescriptions for success. It is, however, a most essential element in the development of joint programs. To plan for successful interinstitutional cooperation means to plan methods of

conflict control and that, inevitably, means the development of standardized information systems which provide the essential tools for conflict management.

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